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The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India 1885–1985

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between the Congress party and the tribal (or adivasi) population of India, both before and since 1947, have been deeply equivocal. Regardless of debate about the social origins of the Congress, or the nature of peasant mobilisation in the nationalist movement, a striking feature has been the general lack of representation accorded the tribals in the ranks of the party leadership and the relative autonomy of tribal affairs from the Indian nationalist movement as a whole. This does not mean to say that they were not also, at times, engaged in an 'anti-imperialist' struggle. However, the concerns and motivations behind the long history of tribal uprisings in India often had little in common with the mouthings of conventional publicists, and, in many cases, had their origins in events that predated the arrival of the British.

Politically, tribals became something of a non-issue, as far as the Congress was concerned, as soon as the British began to introduce legislation aimed at protecting and segregating tribal areas (Ghurye 1980: 70-97). This policy was strongly reminiscent of the methods of divide and rule by which the British maintained their authority elsewhere in the subcontinent, and was naturally denounced by leading Congress politicians. Jawaharlal Nehru coined the phrase 'anthropological zoo' to describe British policy towards the tribal areas. After the establishment of the 'totally and partially excluded areas' by the Government of India Act of 1935, therefore, Congress was firmly in favour of a policy of assimilation. The tribals were to be treated as equals, and accordingly no different from anyone else. In the years immediately after Independence, British forest regulations were lifted, tribal welfare officers were dismissed, and in many areas tribals suffered a wholesale expropriation of their forest reserves by eager settlers from the lowlands. The sheer destitution that resulted soon drew attention to the very real needs of the tribals, and recognition of the fact that, although equal, they were different. How different is a problem that has plagued development administrators ever since, and the attempts to make special provision for tribal areas have been seriously flawed. So serious have been these flaws that the problem itself is beginning to disappear. The tribals are being assimilated. In many cases the only vestige that remains of once powerful tribal kingdoms is a scattering of sometimes violent proto-nationalist movements, as in the Jharkhand (Bihar) and in Assam.

This denouement has been connived at by academics, as well as by administrators and politicians. Anthropologists in particular have had a great influence over the policies of colonial and post-colonial governments. They have concentrated attention on the maintenance of

tribal 'communities' rather than the often complex and extended material means by which these communities were reproduced. The concept of 'tribal' itself has been reified for so long and by so many different institutions that the problem of tribal 'survival' has become totally misconstrued. As a result administrators have sometimes found themselves in the position of trying to close the stable door long after the horse has bolted. In other cases the effects of interventions have been to make things far worse than if nothing had been done at all. Historians too must bear some responsibility for the elitist and centrist view of Indian life that they have purveyed, even in recent attempts to redress that very imbalance.

This paper presents a brief survey of the history of, and recent writings on, 'the tribal problem' in India and suggests that, despite our very best endeavours, the margins of politics, the margins of capitalism and the margins of academic enquiry still remain remarkably entwined.

THE TRIBAL 'PROBLEM'

Tribal uprisings in India have a long history. Often these involved massive confrontations with the British. Such was the case in 1772 when the Mal Paharias of Bihar rose, in 1818 when the Gonds of the Satpuras took to arms under the leadership of Appa Sahib (pretender to the Nagpur kingdom), in 1831 when the Hos of Singhbhum revolted, in the 1830s, when the Lushais and Daflas of Assam took to raiding the plains and the Khamptis broke out in open revolt, in 1846 when the Bhils of Gujarat rose under the leadership of Kuwar Jive Vasavo, and preeminently with the Santhal uprising of 1855 in Bihar which ended in the wanton massacre of 10,000 tribals during British reprisals. Uprisings and retaliations were often repeated again and again until the insurgents were worn down and their resistance broken.

Most of these 'uprisings' were a part of wars of resistance being fought against colonial conquest. They were parallel to but more prolonged than the great set battles between Wellesley and the Marathas in the Deccan and against the armies of Tipu Sultan in the south. These wars were prolonged because, although there may have been tribal kings and chiefs, there was no sophisticated or centralised bureaucracy to assist the British in imposing their rule in the tribal areas. Thus in Assam there were more than twenty uprisings between 1826 (the date of the British conquest) and 1932 (when the last Naga revolt was put down). In central India the process began later but progressed more quickly. The first expeditionary force into Bastar in 1842 (led by Colonel Blunt) was attacked and driven out. For many years the British were satisfied to collect only a formal tribute from the Gond raja of the territory. When they finally imposed direct administration over it, in 1910, there was another uprising. This was effectively put down, but the area has been a source of foment ever since (Singh 1983: 177-185; Bhatt 1983; Das 1982).

These problems of subordination were no less intractable for the Marathas who preceded the British in central India. In areas like Chhattisgarh which had been taken over (at least nominally) by Rajput principalities, the process of incorporation was rather easier. But large areas in the Satpuras and the Maikal hills were too inaccessible, and were left untouched until the British arrived in the mid nineteenth century. The other reason why subordination was so drawn out was associated with the absence of a centralised administration. Tribal society was characterised more by its 'communal mode' of production and the exploitation of natural surpluses than by the sophistication of its technology, its markets or its system of government. The essence of tribal production was the relationship between distinct sub-clan units and the particular lands in which they hunted, foraged, or cultivated on a shifting basis. They were relatively immobile in this sense, and dependent on a certain abundance of natural resources. It was difficult to overthrow such a system. It tended merely to be squeezed out of existence. This explains why even after their initial conquest, tribal areas remained a thorn in the side of the government, as do the Assamese and the so-called 'Naxalites' of Bastar to this day.

Because of its constitutive role in a wide range of social and economic relations, land was a central issue in most tribal uprisings. This was the case with the Mundas, Hos, Santhals, Bhils, Gonds and Nagas. Hence, although the tribals shared with the peasant communities of India a common exploitation by the British, it was more often their means of production itself, their land, which was being threatened, rather than a greater appropriation of subsistence surpluses. For the tribal the *bête noire* was the British Forest acts, which reserved exclusively for government use large tracts of forest to which formerly tribals had free access and which had been their main source of food. For the non-tribal cultivators of the plains, it was more often the tenancy acts and the revenue courts which cribbed, confined and directed their economic activities. To an extent it was the peasants (not the tribals) who were 'preserved' as the principal source of taxable income for the British administration. The tribals on the other hand tended to be simply ignored and subject to a policy of 'bantuisation'. There was little income to be derived from tribal areas except from the felling of trees for lumber or the clearance and sale of land to settlers or mining companies from the lowlands. The sole use of tribal manpower was as a source of cheap labour, and they were confined as much as possible to inaccessible and infertile tracts, from which they were forced to migrate periodically in order to earn a living (Bates 1985).

In a recent book describing the ideology of peasant insurgency, Guha (1983) has tended to gloss over this difference between the material bases of tribal and peasant culture. Through various instances, such as their common fear and respect for the written word (witnessed in numerous attacks on courts, kacharis and the burning of moneylenders' books) Guha has tried to suggest that tribals and peasants did not have different and various exploiters, but perceived them as one, and in their subordination shared a common cause for revolution. There is

obviously some truth in this, but this generalised notion of subalternity must be dealt with cautiously, as it can obscure as much as it reveals, particularly when it comes to explaining the uneasy and chequered involvement of the Congress in the numerous jacqueries and uprisings amongst tribals in the colonial period.

TRIBALS AND THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

One is tempted to suggest an inverse relationship between the strength of Congress organisation - most evident in the 1930s in provinces like UP, Bihar and Gujarat as well as parts of Andhra - and the development of more elemental and uninhibited forms of popular action like forest upheavals. Though Gandhian nationalism directly or indirectly made a great and perhaps indispensable contribution to the forging of a movement out of longfelt and inchoate grievances, it made little effort to integrate poor peasant and tribal militancy into its mainstream. Where more permanent links were established with tribal movements, it was usually with the relatively moderate sects striving for internal reform (often on 'sanskritising' lines) which tended to appear after the flash-point of millenarian hope had passed away.

(Sarkar 1977: 511-19)

In describing the adivasi, or tribal, movements that contributed to the Indian Independence movement in the inter-war period, Sumit Sarkar adopts a three-fold classification. Firstly, there were the 'moderate sects' patronised by the Congress, amongst which he includes the later Tara Bhagat sects among the Oraons, and the Sapha Hor revival under Bargam Manjhi among the Gumia Santhals in 1930. Secondly, there were the tribal movements in isolation which developed along 'separatist' channels - such as the Nagas or the Jharkhand agitation in Chotanagpur. These were not dissimilar, he believes, to the communal riots among the peasantry springing out of agrarian discontent. Thirdly, there were the 'sometimes adventurist, but truly heroic instances of movements under left guidance: the Hajongs of the Garo Hills, organised by Mani Singh in the late 1930s, the Rajbansis who flocked to the Tebhaga banner in 1946-47; the Warlis of Maharashtra under Godavari Perulakar, [and] the Koyas of the Godavari forests under communist leadership in the Telengana struggle of 1948-51'. With these he also associates the Naxalbari and Srikakulam-Adilabad uprisings of more recent times.

Although perhaps overgenerous in his assessment of the role of the communists, Sarkar's typology is a great advance on previous writings on the subject of tribal revolt which tended to describe them as 'spontaneous', 'violent', or in some other sense irrational, simply because they were not linked to a national political campaign. In many cases, indeed, it is emerging that the concept of Congress or left leadership has been greatly exaggerated. Indications of this are present in much recent historiography and the theme is particularly to the fore in the writings of the so-called 'Subaltern' school. As Ranajit Guha has concluded, 'Indian nationalism of the colonial period

was not what elite historiography had made it out to be. As a praxis involving the masses it did not always conform to the rule book of the Congress party or the tenets of Gandhism' (Guha 1983: 334-5).

In fact, for the reasons I have described, nearly all of these uprisings were primarily prompted by grievances over the expropriation of tribal lands: specifically, the forest acts, and the increasing restrictions on rights to graze, forage and fell trees in highlands that were introduced from the late 1870s onwards. The spark for many of these uprisings, as Fuchs (1979) has emphasised, was the presence of charismatic or 'messianic' leaders. However this eschatological factor can be overrated. As Guha has pointed out, 'messianism' was often largely an ideological working out of the material act of rebellion, an 'economism' he vigorously defends:

Insofar as religion constituted the most expressive sign of [semi-feudal] culture in many of its essential aspects, the peasants' (sic) defiance of the rural elite often involved an attempt to appropriate the dominant religion or to destroy it.

(Guha 1983: 71)

So it was that in the great Santhal revolt of 1855 the Santhals not only seized weapons or property from the dikus (their oppressors) but also appropriated the act of puja (a Hindu form of worship) to assist in their defence. This was not simply an act of negation, but an attempt to rally the insurgents and to focus their grievances. The same happened many years later in the Rampa country in the Godavari and Visakhapatnam Agencies (which was the centre of endemic revolt for more than a hundred years). Here, between August 1922 and September 1924, a forest satyagraha was led by Alluri Sitarama Raju, an outsider, who wandered among the tribals after 1915, claiming astrological and medicinal powers (Arnold 1982). Raju inspired his followers with the belief that he was bullet proof and the claim that the god Shri Jagannathaswami would shortly be incarnate amongst them. This uprising covered an area of 2,500 square miles and lasted for nearly two years. But despite this religious element in the proceedings, an important reason why they were inspired to revolt and kept going for so long was because they suffered archetypal tribal grievances centred on police exactions, their indebtedness to traders in the lowlands, the abkari or liquor regulations, and the restrictions on podu, or shifting cultivation (known as jhum in Assam and bewar in the Central Provinces). In all these respects there was little to distinguish this rebellion from others that took place in tribal areas in the same period. Typical, to take another example, was a rebellion led by a Konda Dora named Korra Malliya in the Visakhapatnam Agency in 1900. This rebellion was prompted, apparently, by a tightening of the forest rules involving an extension of the reserved forests of Bhadrachalam from 68 square miles in 1874 to 942 square miles by 1901 (Sarkar 1977). In neighbouring Bastar a similar rebellion in 1900, known as the bhumakal, is also thought to have been prompted by government reservation of forest lands (Singh 1983: 178). In some cases Congressmen were involved, in

some cases, indeed, the communists, but it is difficult to prove that either of them had a fundamental role in initiating these uprisings.

Despite his success in describing the means by which peasants and 'tribal peasants' overcame their differences in the course of a revolt, Ranajit Guha's recent work fails to do justice to the autonomy of insurrectionists, particularly in tribal areas. Despite his claims to the contrary, it is apparent that, for Guha, nationalism, especially working class nationalism, is the only respectable (and successful) basis for revolution. For this reason he combines all aspects of 'backward consciousness' - tribal leadership, kin relations, religion, territoriality and ethnicity - in an effort to account for the potency of insurgency in the nineteenth century. He concludes, however, that it was a poor substitute for 'organised nationalism' and the 'class organisation of the working people' (Guha 1983: 331). The entire history of insurrection in the nineteenth century tends to be viewed from this perspective of the development of nationalism and 'the militant mass movement'. For this reason he lumps tribes and peasants together, without distinction, and avoids almost entirely any reference to social structure or the precise mechanisms of their oppression. Thus, despite the hope that he specifically expresses, Guha's exposition is a singularly useless guide to political action in the present, since it is by no means clear why the ruling Congress party, the bourgeoisie which manipulates and largely controls it, and the peasantry should have any cause for disagreement. The twenty-odd pages that Guha does give over to a discussion of class is devoted entirely to stressing that it could contribute to 'solidarity'. With whom and for what is not clear.¹ In Guha's account the tribals' use of the word diku (or outsider) is an embarrassment (Guha 1983: 285), and the persistence of this usage and of tribal insurrection today is inexplicable.

This is not so in David Hardiman's shorter, but much more coherent account of the Devi movement in south Gujarat. This reform movement among the adivasis of the Ranimahals was not a form of 'sanskritisation', he stresses, but involved an endorsement of values which 'were those of the classes which possessed political power' and was primarily an act of self-assertion. Hardiman emphasises that 'despite ... inequalities, there was little exploitation of one adivasi by another. The worst exploitation was carried out by high caste moneylenders and Parsi liquor dealers' (1984: 217 and 201). The elitism and conformism of the dominant castes in Gujarat and the division between these ujjilparaj (or fair-skinned) castes and the kaliparaj (or dark-skinned) was deeply felt in Gujarat. The exploitation of cheap, migrant tribal labour was also, and still is, an important source of income for the sugarcane factory owners and capitalist farmers of the region (Bates 1981; Breman 1978, 1979 and 1985). As a consequence, the Dewan of Baroda, many other local Hindu leaders of the 1920s, and the Parsis, of course, strongly resisted the Devi movement. Opposition to the movement was only tempered when the British, after initial misgivings, began to encourage it themselves. Its political importance was then too great to be ignored. Liaison between the adivasis and the Congress was forged,

and the first Kaliparaj conference held at Shekhpur in Mahuva taluka of Baroda state in 1923. This was attended by 20,000 adivasis, and Vallabhbhai Patel gave a speech. Although Congress leaders did promote land reforms and prohibition, which in the long term benefited the adivasis, nevertheless in the short term they were less sympathetic and discouraged the total boycott of Parsis which was a key feature of the movement. Often only those aspects of revitalisation were encouraged which reflected a desire to increase purity in the Hindu or Brahmanical sense.²

The relative autonomy of many tribal movements has been further stressed by Henningham (1981), Baker (1984), and in essays by Ramachandra Guha, Tanika Sarkar, David Hardiman and Swapan Dasgupta in Guha (1985). Henningham briefly describes movements among the Santhals and Musahars of Bihar in the 1930s, whilst Baker gives a more detailed account of the forest satyagrahas of the 1920s and 1930s in Madhya Pradesh. In another essay on the tribals of south Gujarat, David Hardiman describes the conflict between British moralists, the excise department, Parsi distillers and the temperance dogmatists among Congress leaders, and the manner in which local tribals tended to get caught between these rival factions. Guha concentrates on British exploitation of the Forest Reserves and their use of begar (forced labour) and the opposition this aroused (principally in the form of incendiarism) from the 'hillmen' of Kumaun in the foothills of the Himalayas. Tanika Sarkar describes a minor rebellion of the Santhals in the Malda district of Bengal as a 'basically autonomous manifestation of tribal anti-imperialism' based on a rich tradition of both passive and violent resistance, and concludes that, although different, the belief systems and customary modes of struggle of the Santhals could be incorporated within the wider framework of the Gandhian movement. Swapan Dasgupta's essay gives much more hard data on the form and extent of the exploitation of tribals in Midnapur, at the same time emphasising that 'economic change in the Jungle Mahals was a euphemism for the loss of the political power of the adivasis'. Perhaps it is for this reason that he gives greater emphasis to the tensions that existed between the diku and the adivasi and between the aims and purposes of Congress and of tribal agitations. At best, he concludes, the Congress attitude to the tribals could be described as one of tolerant apathy.

David Baker's study of tribal politics in Madhya Pradesh is more forthright in arguing that the strength of feeling amongst tribals was not understood by Congress leaders and that they were consequently incapable of controlling or incorporating agitations in tribal areas once they had begun. The 1922 agitation in Raipur district of Chhattisgarh was typical. It began at the instance of leaders in Dhamtari, a tahsil town south of Raipur, but was subsequently disowned by Ravi Shanker Shukla, the (Brahman) Congress leader of the district, as it got out of control. The agitation originally centred on the theft of wood from government forests, but the Nagri and Sankra villagers got carried away, owing to a long history of suppressed discontent, and began systematically looting the forests.

The same thing happened, on a much wider scale, in 1930. This agitation was originally mounted by Seth Govind Das and D.P. Mishra of Jabalpur and Ravi Shanker Shukla. As originally authorised by Congress High Command (in the shape of Motilal Nehru) the satyagraha was intended to be confined only to the cutting of grass in government reserved forests. But in many instances mobs of several thousand took to pulling down forests wholesale. Significantly, outbreaks of incendiarism had occurred several months before the go-ahead had been given, and meetings of Gonds had already decided that they were going to cut wood and bamboo and graze cattle in government forests. As soon as they heard of the Congress High Command's decision, a crowd of 3,000 Gonds and Korkus marched to Betul town, armed with axes and lathis. Numerous instances of assault on forest officials and police were reported and the whole of Betul district was declared to be in a disturbed state, the district council dissolved, and punitive police imposed on it.

All in all, satyagrahas occurred in every one of the 22 districts of the Central Provinces and Berar, and in six of these (Amraoti, Betul, Jabalpur, Mandla, Seoni and Raipur) they occurred on a widespread and frequently uncontrollable scale. These were truly mass agitations, with crowds of 4,000 to 6,000 being involved in cutting wood from Seoni forests on two separate occasions, and between 10,000 and 75,000 being reported on the opening day of the satyagraha at Talegaon in Arvi tahsil, Wardha. On six occasions the police were obliged to open fire to disperse crowds, and the government was ultimately forced to appoint a committee to enquire into complaints about forest regulations and to excise common grazing lands from government forests in sensitive areas like Pusad in Yeotmal. Baker concludes:

With the occurrence of independent tribal satyagrahas, as in Betul and Mandla, and satyagrahas started by Congress getting out of control, as in Raipur, the extent of Congress responsibility for the agitation is qualified. At the ensuing elections for the Legislative Assembly in 1937, tribal voters elected independents as well as Congressmen. And, as if to confirm Congress hesitation in launching tribal agitation in the forests, after Independence successive Congress governments continued the forest policies of their British predecessors.

(Baker 1984: 90)

For this reason, the same tactics used against the British were repeated against the Congress government of Madhya Pradesh in the late 1950s (Singh 1982a: 1380 and 1983: 187-95).

The equivocal relationship between Congress and the tribals in central India is hardly surprising when one considers the history of just one of the Congress leaders of the 1930s: Seth Govind Das. He was the son of Jiwan Das, a loyalist notable, and great grandson of Raja Gokul Das, the biggest banker-moneylender and wealthiest Marwari of his time in the whole of Madhya Pradesh. Much of his wealth had been made by cheating his way into rights of ownership over vast tracts of tribal lands in

districts like Mandla and Betul. In Mandla alone he held 89 villages in 1912, the tenants of which were fiercely exploited. One government officer commented that 'it is generally found that in villages held by this firm the actual pitch of rent makes little difference, the tenants being for the most part hopelessly indebted to the firm for seed grain and on other accounts'.³ With the expropriation and reservation of forests completed at this date by the British government, there was no way the tribal could escape this fate other than by migrating (Bates 1987). A large part of the Gokul Das fortune was handed down to Govind Das, whose influential position in the Congress party was to a great extent the result of the prestige, connections and wealth that his family had acquired (Baker 1979: 129). Not only was Govind Das influential in the Congress, but he also inherited leadership of the Jabalpur-based *Malguzars* (or Landlords') *Sabha*, a long established platform for opposition to such things as tenant rights, debt conciliation and rent arbitration. His other qualities notwithstanding, a more unlikely representative of tribal interests could hardly be found.

This clash of interests between Congress leaders and the tribals who became involved in the mass agitations of the 1930s and 1940s is found again and again. In 1930, as many as 170,000 villagers, many of them *adivasis*, were involved in forest satyagrahas in Ahmednagar and Nasik in Maharashtra, much of this action being entirely independent of Congress party initiatives. Amongst the Santhals, the political movement of the early twenties in Midnapur district was also largely autonomous of Congress leadership (Dasgupta 1980: 127-46), despite the fact that the Santhals were amongst the more literate and advanced of tribals. During the mid-1940s the *Tebhaga* movement in Bengal was most strongly supported, not in the southern strongholds of the Provincial Kisan Sabha, but amongst the tribals in the more inaccessible north of the country, particularly the *Rajbansis*, the *Hajongs*, and the militant *Duars* of Jalpaiguri district (Sarkar 1983: 439-41; Sen 1979: 448 and 462). The work of communist activists was important here, and the tribals had every reason to shun contacts with the landlord-dominated Congress. But what was significant was the speed and extent to which the movement was supported. In explaining this phenomenon an important consideration must be the fact that tribes like the *Hajongs* and *Hais* had lost more than half their land to capitalists and settlers from the lowlands by the 1930s. To emphasise this fact is not mere economism but a recognition of a series of deeply significant events in the lives of nearly all these people.

Ranajit Guha praises these tribal movements, but views them as backward and transient in nature, precisely because he ignores their material origins. As with so many authors, insurrections that occurred in tribal areas in the 1930s and 1940s are no longer described as movements of the 'tribal peasantry' but are subsumed into the telos of the 'militant (nationalist) mass agitation'. In this way insurrection is defined not according to its origins, but its results (Guha 1983). Carried to extremes, the reification of 'subaltern consciousness' that lies behind this analysis leads to the sort of misunderstanding and

confusion found in the debate between Arnold and Atlury over the nature of the Gudem-Rampa uprisings of 1839 to 1924, (Arnold 1982 and 1985; Atlury 1984 and 1985). Arnold describes these as essentially elite feudings in the 1839-62 phase, which became more popular in the period 1879-1916, and were (by contrast) less well supported in 1922-24 when allied to the nationalist cause. Atlury, on the other hand, sees the apotheosis of the adivasi agitation as coming precisely at the moment when it moved into an anti-colonial phase under Raju's leadership. Thus polarised, both fall short of a satisfactory explanation of the persistence and longevity of these tribal insurrections, a persistence which mirrored their relative autonomy in Gudem-Rampa as much as anywhere else.

Arnold gives an excellent account of a number of the forms taken by colonial exploitation in Gudem-Rampa, though without attempting to quantify them. He also describes the various ways in which Indians themselves could act as the agents of colonialism, pointing out that 'the Indian nationalists of the plains were no friends of the hillmen; rather they voiced the avarice, the hunger for land and profit, of the Telugu contractors, traders and immigrant farmers' (Arnold 1982: 114). He then concludes that by the late nineteenth century tribal society and economy had been effectively undermined and that with this went all hope of continuing popular resistance. But this is not convincingly demonstrated. The Godavari forest zone as a whole continued to be a hotbed of unrest. It was here, for example, that the Telengana guerrillas made their last stand at the end of a war in northern Hyderabad which lasted from 1946 until 1951, and at its height gave a communist-led militia control over an area of more than 16,000 square miles. For many years after this the region continued to support independent and communist candidates in preference to the Congress in assembly elections (Sundarayya 1972; and Sarkar 1983: 445). This could be described, without too much optimism, as being as much an instance of adivasis and poor peasants coopting a political leadership as it was the other way round. Calman and others, including Desai (1986), describe how Srikakulam in Visakhapatnam (an area very close to Gudem-Rampa) was also a centre of Naxalite activity in 1968-69, and similar adivasi agitations continue to this day in the Godavari forest zone as well as in other forest areas in Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Tripura. To explain why, we need to take a much longer-term view of their material grievances, as well as to examine the relationship between Congress and the tribals since the departure of the British.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE: THE PROBLEM OF TRIBAL 'DEVELOPMENT'

For the reasons already described, the tribals were not only a thorn in the side of the British, but were also often opposed in action and interest to the activities of the Congress. It was the army of independent India that finally put down the Telengana movement as well as the Naga revolt of the mid 1950s, and the relationship between the government and those on the margins of Indian society has been a cause of political controversy ever since. Initially, Congress policies were

a curious mixture of reflections and reproductions of the policies of the British. The so-called 'backward' communities were relabelled as 'scheduled'. Positive discrimination was also built into the constitution in favour of the scheduled tribes with the declared purpose, as Sardar Patel described it, in a well known phrase, of endeavouring 'to bring the tribal people up to the level of Mr Jaipal Singh [the President of the Adivasi Mahasabha], and not keep them as tribes, so that, ten years hence ... the word "tribes" may be removed altogether when they should have come up to our level' (Ghurye 1980: 349).

There was uncertainty, however, as to quite how this policy should be pursued. One method was simply to repeal or ignore protective legislation of the colonial period and allow nature to take its course. In many cases this resulted in the virtual disappearance of forests in the hill regions which constituted the tribals' ancestral homeland (Füer-Haimendorf 1977: 522). Thus between 1951 and 1971 something like a million Biharis migrated into the tribal areas of Chotanagpur, many taking to the cultivation of large tracts of formerly tribal lands or seeking work in the iron and coal mines newly established in the region. Schemes of colonisation and resettlement launched in the aftermath of Partition (such as the Danda Karanya project in Bastar) further ate into the traditional reserves of tribal cultivators. Simultaneously, tribal industries and crafts declined over India as a whole, and, partly because of the superexploitation of their labour, tribals gained little from the new forms of employment (Singh 1982: x). The condition of many tribals worsened as a consequence and they were found to be missing out altogether on the benefits of the community development programme, which was the main plank of rural development planning under the Nehru regime. The attempt was then made to maintain the machinery of protection in scheduled areas and to combine this with a programme of development. So it was that the Special Multipurpose Tribal Development Blocks were born and put into action in the second five year plan. Initially, 43 such blocks were established and allocated Rs. 1.5 million in funding each, in addition to the Rs. 1.2 million provided to these areas in the budget of the Community Development ministry (GOI 1960: 176-88). However, this level of funding could not make up for the lack of planning and clear-cut objectives, and the results were generally wasteful (in welfare terms) and unsatisfactory.

In 1960, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin chaired a committee to examine the operation of these Special Tribal Blocks, a main conclusion of which was that more needed to be done to help the tribals to help themselves through the improvement of institutions of tribal self government, known as the 'tribal councils' (GOI 1960; Elwin 1965). The problem was that the damage had already been done, and most tribal panchayats or councils had long since collapsed (Ghurye 1980). In response to the recommendations of this report, more than a hundred tribal development blocks were created. Attempts were also made to revive tribal councils and to mediate tribal development through the hands of so-called 'leaders', who, it was assumed, would best understand the needs of the people. There were echoes here of British policy

toward the 'tribes' and 'chiefs' of Kenya in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of those accepted as representatives of the tribals were simply the most westernised, and the direction of funding into these channels merely increased inequality and the income of the better off.

Welfare work amongst tribals has also been obstructed by non-tribals (and members of the new tribal elite) who have a vested interest in resisting any improvement in their condition (Fuchs 1973: 293; Fürer-Haimendorf 1982; and Kunhaman 1985). Planning and implementation has failed even in its own terms, with a large proportion of funds allocated to scheduled areas usually going unspent each year. Overall, as a proportion of total expenditure, the amount spent on the scheduled tribes decreased from 1 per cent of total plan outlays in 1951-56 to less than 0.5 per cent by the time of the fourth five year plan of 1969-74. This was despite a steady increase in the amount supposedly allocated for spending in this sector (Corbridge 1984: 94-5).

Whether the failure of the community development programme was the fault of the strategy, the administration, or the tribal communities themselves, it is difficult to say. Certainly the gap in the standard of living between those living in tribal and non-tribal areas was not decreasing, and after 1974 it clearly began to increase (eg. Nayar 1984). At the same time tribals were losing control over their land at an increasing rate, the size of the remaining cultivated holdings was getting steadily smaller, and legislative attempts to reverse these trends proved to be ineffective (Dubey 1977). As a consequence, the number of tribal cultivators as a proportion of total tribal workers fell from 68 to 57.5 per cent, while the ratio of agricultural labourers rose from 20 to 33 per cent. These figures were slightly affected by a change in the definition of 'labour' in the 1971 census, but were nonetheless indicative of a growing problem of land alienation which the administration seemed powerless to control. In addition to land alienation, there was also the continuing decline in tribal crafts and industries which meant that overall the tribals' dependence on the primary sector (agriculture) increased, from 91 to 94 per cent, between 1961 and 1971 (Singh 1982: xii).

The other arm of tribal uplift was the positive discrimination or reservation policy (Galanter 1984). This policy was reviewed in 1980 by the controversial Mandal Commission (GOI 1980). Not only has this been a bitterly divisive policy, but the reservation legislation itself, as described in the Commission report, has proved to be so full of loopholes as to have little practical effect. In Gujarat, for example, there has been violent agitation over this issue both in 1981 and in 1985, when it was proposed that the reservation of university places for scheduled castes and tribes should be increased from 10 to 28 per cent. The irony was that only 5.6 per cent of those places already reserved were actually being filled (*India Today*, 15 May 1985: 26). An alternative policy, proposed by the Rane Commission (set up in the wake of the 1981 riots), was that scheduling should be dropped altogether and benefits and reserved places allocated on the basis of income. The

whole confused and controversial Congress policy of 'uplifting' the adivasi and harijan communities would then be dropped in favour of a form of means testing. Far from satisfactory in themselves, these proposals have in any case proved to be unacceptable so far because they would undermine a key electoral strategy of the Congress state government.

Recognising its failures on the economic front, the government of India has since 1969 invested in a plethora of new, centrally sponsored projects for hill areas, tribal areas and drought-prone areas, as well as for small farmers, marginal farmers and agricultural labourers (Sharma 1984: 55-82). The fifth plan also floated the idea of Integrated Tribal Development Projects and special multipurpose credit and marketing agencies for tribal areas. The response has not been gratitude, but a growing number of agitations amongst adivasis in the seventies and eighties with a communitarian and ecological slant (Gupta 1981). Best known is the Chipko movement amongst the tribals and peasants of the Himalayas (Das 1983). There is also the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha - which has recently split into red (proletarian) and green (tribal) factions - and an offshoot, the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (Sengupta 1982). The JMM actually managed to force the World Bank to discontinue a 'social forestry' scheme in the highlands of Chotanagpur in the late 1970s, and the organisation of tribal labourers in Chhattisgarh and Bastar is now resulting in an increasing number of 'encounters' between so-called 'Naxalites' and the police, a phenomenon previously unheard of in this region (Omvedt 1984).

The forced harvesting by tribals of land taken from them by non-tribals has occurred on a wide scale in the early 1980s in both Madhya Pradesh and Chotanagpur. Thousands attended a Gond darbar held at Keslapur in Madhya Pradesh in February 1981, and 15 tribals were killed in firing in April 1981 when police attempted to prevent a similar gathering (Singh 1982a: 1381). The Madhya Pradesh state government's forest policy in particular has come in for heavy criticism. Through its Forest Development Corporation it seems intent on almost completely wiping out the last enclaves of traditional tribal economy. Similar activity by the FDC in Chotanagpur has aroused opposition not only from tribals, but also from private forest contractors, who have previously relied on the tribals as a source of cheap labour (Singh 1982a: 1381). There seems little chance of changing these policies since 52 per cent of Madhya Pradesh's non-tax revenue comes from the sale of forest produce or forest-based industries. If anything, things are likely to get much worse, since the massive Narmada Valley Irrigation Project will probably submerge some 11 per cent of forest lands in the valley - with no serious attempt having been made to calculate the ecological impact of this, or to plan the resettlement of displaced communities (Kothari 1984; Colchester 1985).

At best, government efforts, even in communist controlled states, have created a picnic type of economy in tribal areas, as described by Manas Das Gupta in the case of Tripura:

Just as we take all our requirements to the picnic spot and enjoy ourselves without involving the local people, so also in [Tripura], all the development projects are executed mostly with outside labour and materials. The local people are just onlookers without having any sense of participation.

(Das Gupta 1984)⁴

It thus seems that neither the 'culturalist' approach of Elwins's 1960 committee, nor the more economic efforts of recent centrally directed investment programmes, are achieving their objectives. Although it has advanced hugely on the efforts made by the British, the Congress, even when it has had the political will, has not yet succeeded in incorporating the tribals politically, or overcoming the problems of poverty and backwardness still endemic in tribal or 'scheduled' areas. Worse still, the attitude of many now seems to be that by ignoring, or positively persecuting the problem, it might just be persuaded to go away. All of these factors point to the urgent need for a redefinition of the concepts of 'the tribal' and of 'the tribal problem', both historically and in the contemporary Indian State.

CONCLUSION: THE CONCEPT OF THE TRIBAL

In a collection of essays on crime and criminality in India, Arnold, Gordon, Yang and others have described the history of the legislation on 'Criminal Tribes' which the British used to codify and control a great number of the tribals in India (Yang 1985). Arnold claims that the origins of this legislation lay in a combination of racism with the administration's need to be seen to be doing something to maintain the coercive presence of the State in a situation where they were short of both the knowledge and means to maintain the British occupation. The reverse side of the coin was the concept of the 'martial race': where the criminal tribes figured in this discourse as the 'problem', the martial races were very much the solution, or at the least the principal source of loyal recruits to the British army. Many of these attributes of 'criminality' were considered to be hereditary. The belief that lawlessness could be the exclusive preserve of particular tribal groups was also upheld by colonial theories which explained the caste system purely in terms of affinal ties and religious beliefs. The newly invented 'science' of anthropology was then pressed into service at the end of the nineteenth century in order to help identify and isolate those tribes which habitually defied British notions of social order.

Many of these preconceptions have influenced the thinking of the government of independent India. But it is not enough merely to counter the racism of the British against the tribals with a racism directed on their behalf. It is necessary to understand the wider purpose of these concepts. It is important to remember that the racism of the British was not directed simply at maintaining control, but (as has already been mentioned) at incorporating the Indian population within the colonial system. The British were not in India simply for the benefit of Christianity, Civilisation, or the second sons of the aristocracy. They

were in India to develop it and to exploit as part of the international colonial economy. India's contribution was commodities such as opium, wheat, cotton, indigo and jute, and the men and bureaucracy to maintain Britain's largest standing army in the East. This was paid for by a tax on land and this income was secured by the introduction of private property. It was for this reason that the British came so sharply into conflict with the people designated for convenience's sake as 'the tribals'. They were not monetised, they did not recognise individual property, they did not produce taxable surpluses, they often produced things communally and they were imbued with an ideology about the production and distribution of wealth that was fundamentally egalitarian. In all these respects they were quintessential outlaws: which helps explain the 'criminal tribes' mentality. Just as with 'thuggee' in the 1830s, so with 'criminal tribes' in the 1930s. The British could not accept that wandering bands of 'landless' tribals could be anything but criminals. This was a particularly striking phenomenon in Central India, where the abundance of forest land and the relatively late arrival of the British meant that property rights were slow to catch on.

Where tribals could not be 'settled' and persuaded to take to the plough, they were coerced into labouring or migrating.⁵ In areas where the problem was unmanageable they were isolated or 'reserved', and largely ignored by the colonial authorities (except for the police). It is partly for this reason that the development policies of post-colonial governments have taken such a long time to get off the ground. The infrastructure of roads and rails etcetera needed for work in these areas simply was not there. To understand why these tribals were so difficult to incorporate, we need to know much more about the material realities of tribal life: not just the nature of their economy, but also the peculiarities of the ideology that went with it, and the forms of supra-local organisation, or 'State' systems that sustained them. To distinguish 'tribals' from 'peasants' is a step forward, but to do this properly we will probably have to drop the monolithic concept of 'the tribal' altogether.

The classic materialist definition of the difference between caste and tribal society is that put forward by Bailey (1957 and 1961). Bailey describes caste society as being 'organic', because it involves mutual interdependence and a division of labour amongst producers. The basic social unit of caste society he believes to be the village. Amongst tribals he argues that the basic social unit is the clan territory. Tribal society he then characterises as 'segmentary' because within this area the producers seemed to function independently of each other. His models were the Oriyas and Khonds of highland Orissa, who were relatively intermixed. This made attractive the idea of describing caste and tribe as being opposite poles of the same continuum. For the same reason, he adopted what he called a 'political-cum-economic' definition, really a political science one, because it was not possible to distinguish clearly caste and tribal modes of economic activity. What is missing from this definition is some explanation of the technological differences between the two modes, and the supra-local forms of

organisation that went with them and which could actually inhibit the mixing of the two societies. In the Madhya Pradesh of the nineteenth century this spatial separation of the two was very clear. The territory of caste society did not end at the boundary of the village, and neither was the tribal area defined purely by bonds of affinity between kin groups and certain tracts of land. Both caste and tribal society had their distinctive 'State' systems and forms of exchange (Bates 1987), and the primitive communist, acephalous society, as such, probably never existed.

To explain the problems of secessionism and development, these societies ought to be located, not simply on the continuum of growing 'organicism', but according to the degree of their commercialisation and integration into an extended, capitalist system of economy. A typology of regions might then be envisaged according to whether the tribals in these areas are primarily either (a) foodgatherers and hunters, or (b) nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, such as the Birhars in Bihar or the Gujjars and Gaddi of Himachal Pradesh, or (c) shifting cultivators, supplementing their livelihood by hunting and foodgathering, or (d) wet terrace cultivators, such as in Assam and the sub-Himalayan tracts, or (e) those supplementing the above forms of livelihood by engaging in field or plantation labour or by labouring on government works, or (f) dependent subsistence farmers using the plough (either labourers, tenants or a mixture of the two), or (g) independent, but subsistence-oriented, plough cultivators. In the first category, foodgatherers and hunters, would be located the Paharias of Bihar and the Jarawas and Sentinelese of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Few in Madhya Pradesh today could be described as purely hunter-gatherers, but many of the Baiga of eastern Mandla and Gonds of southern Chanda and southern Bastar would fit into the categories of shifting cultivators and part-time labourers, as would nearly two million Assamese. The Gonds, Khonds and Bhils of the Satpuras would be largely of the last three categories, part-time labourers or subsistence plough farmers, some of the part-time labourers migrating considerable distances in order to seek work in the Forest Department, which is the principal government employer.

The foodgathering and hunting economy may be regarded as the most autonomous and least sophisticated. Those in the last category, that of the independent plough cultivators, include the many tribals who are moving into the ranks of the simple commodity producers (either owners, tenants or labourers) and the more generalised commodity producers and buyers and sellers of labour, generically known as peasants. Movement between these categories requires a concomitant development of exchange (of salt, axeheads, cattle, etc.), of class structure, and of supra-local forms of organisation (including chiefs and small armies), as well as a greater or lesser degree of cooperation within the labour process itself. However, this ought not be regarded as a unilineal process in the manner envisaged by Bailey, or as progressive epochs in the conquest of nature, as described by Sahlins (1968). Any one of these systems of economy might be an end point in itself, and there are examples of some tribes, such as the Kordaku of north eastern Surguja, who have been

forced to regress from shifting cultivation to gathering as a result of government prohibitions (Singh 1977). Characteristic of all of them is that their conditions of existence in the past few hundred years have been predominantly determined by the development of capitalism within the subcontinent. The transformation of tribal economies and social formations has been a dialectical response to these pressures, and in the process a variety of forms of accommodation and coexistence between tribal and capitalist producers has developed. It is primarily these adaptations that define what is understood to be the 'tribal' and the tribal forms of economy found in India today.

In practice, it is only in these terms that we can satisfactorily distinguish the tribal. Any definition that reifies animism, egalitarianism, race or dialect as a distinguishing characteristic is going to come unstuck (Fuchs 1973: 24). Neither can tribal societies continue to be treated as complete territorial or cultural isolates: new research reveals that many tribal areas (including parts of Central India, such as Chhattisgarh) had extensive experience of immigration from, and interrelation with, 'caste society' since before the eighteenth century, and that the commonly accepted disjunction between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic traditions is more functional than historical. The process of acculturation in tribal societies, where it has occurred, has also probably had less to do with the proselytising nature of Brahminism or 'the Hindu mode of absorption' (ie. the conversion of tribals to the values of the caste system - see Bose 1953 and 1975), and is more related to technology transfer by ordinary peasants and artisans or to the forcible destruction of tribal modes of production (see Singh 1985: 53-87).

More importantly, reliance on such definitions does little to advance understanding of the problems of poverty and development, or the persistence of revivalist movements, in tribal areas today. On the other hand, comprehension of the history of the tribals that includes theorisation about the development of tribal States and supra-local forms of exchange would not only address these questions directly, but may also help to explain the links between tribal modes of production, social formation and the politics of secession. Those peoples and areas we know as 'tribal' today are all the remnants of previous polities and economic systems. By tracing their development and the nature of their dissolution we can better understand the different ideologies and forms of society that survive. Some, for example, suffered the political consequences of colonial conquest, but experienced only a gradual change in their economy. Such was the case with a number of the Gond kingdoms of Madhya Pradesh such as Kherla, Garha-Mandla, Deogarh, Bastar and Chanda. Others, such as the Santhals in Bihar, experienced more rapid erosion of their forest-based economy but still, or perhaps because of this, managed to retain a strong sense of clan structure and of traditional leadership (Somers 1977). Today this acts as a contributory factor in the popularity of the more radical elements in the movement for an independent tribal state in this region, known as the Jharkhand (Panchbhai 1983). The tribal kingdoms of Madhya Pradesh, by contrast,

survived almost intact until their invasion by the Marathas in the late eighteenth century. Their subsequent economic incorporation (and underdevelopment) by the British was more subtle and long-lived, hinging as it did on a policy of marginalisation and bantuisation rather than outright expropriation (Bates 1985). This in part accounts for the lower level of political organisation among the tribals of Central India today (see Saha 1987). Examples of this nature abound, but it is only by examining in detail the history of economic and social organisation among the various tribal groups over a period of several hundred years that we can begin to build up a coherent picture of their different evolutionary experiences: a task that has barely yet begun.

A characteristic of the incorporation of tribals within the economies of colonial and post-colonial India has been the development of economic differentiation, not only internally but also spatially (eg. Mishra 1983). It is this phenomenon that has given rise to the notion of the internal colony (Sinha 1973; and Jones 1978): the most localised form at the end of a chain of metropolitan-satellite relations that have distinguished the development of the international economy. This was encouraged as a matter of State policy but developed a momentum of its own as tribal areas became increasingly impoverished and reliant on the economic growth in adjacent territories. It could be that it is this phenomenon, the problem of structural disadvantage, that is becoming the principal feature of tribalism in India today. Having lost key elements of their economy and social structure, it could be that the tribals are being incorporated, en bloc, as a subordinate class: a reserve of cheap labour within a dependent capitalist system of economy. There is certainly evidence of this happening in the colonial period, particularly in central India. If it is largely a continuation of this process that we see at work in India today, then a solution of the 'tribal problem' is unlikely to present itself within the immediate future. Secessionist movements in Bihar and elsewhere may be a natural response, as they have been in the past. But whether this will give anyone anything other than merely a passing sensation of greater control over their lives is a debatable matter.

NOTES

1. Elsewhere, Guha (1983a) has elaborated on his critique of Indian historiography in an attempt to prove that he is less guilty than others of appropriating the historical personality of the insurgent. Guha believes that 'the insurgent can rely on its performance to recover his place in history' (Guha 1983a), and states that 'to acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him' (1983: 4). The consciousness that Guha attributes to the peasant is, however, of his own making. Since his personal desire is 'a more abiding and comprehensive reversal' (1983: 337), he has merely identified the peasants' consciousness

- with this programme - an 'error' (1983: 5) not dissimilar to the colonialist's 'view of history as politics and of the past as a guide to the future'. Those he identifies as not sharing this consciousness he describes, not as 'unconscious' (as do socialist, nationalist or colonialist historians) but as suffering 'backward consciousness' (1983: 198). He is thus at least as programmatic as the historians he denounces. This should come as a surprise to none but the most committed empiricists. For an effective debunking of the structuralist approach Guha uses in 1983a, see Anderson (1983).
2. Jabalpur Commissioner, in Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office, Nagpur: Central Provinces Survey and Settlement Records, Bundle 143/7/1/1904/2/5-7.
 3. A number of other revivalist movements in Gujarat are described in Lal (1983) and a secessionist movement amongst the tribals in Desai (1983).
 4. See also the defence of the CPI-M's record in Tripura, as given in the reply by Malbika Das Gupta (1985).
 5. An account of how the British envisaged incorporating the tribals of Nepal into the colonial economy is given in Hunter (1868). I am grateful to David Arnold for drawing to my attention this fascinating example of official thinking on the subject.

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